U.S. Representative

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Opinion

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National Missile Defense: One Milestone at a Time

The Pentagon will soon do a “Deployment Readiness Review” on a national missile defense (NMD) system. Despite its name, this review will decide just one thing: whether what we have warrants pouring concrete for a radar in the Aleutians. This is one of several components in a missile defense system, and one with the longest lead time. In other words, it must be started soon if it is to be completed on schedule with other components.

The Pentagon's assessment will go to President Clinton, who will then decide whether to start construction of the NMD radar in May 2001. His decision will mark a major milestone in the program, but two even more important milestones are still to come: first, whether to move from demonstration to engineering, and second, whether to move from engineering to production of the interceptors that will be deployed.

This decision process is drawing criticism on the left and right. Critics on the left, argue that we should not take any step that may result in withdrawal from or abrogation of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. Critics on the right believe that we should make an irrevocable decision to deploy, notwithstanding the ABM Treaty.

Both camps seem to assume that the Pentagon's Deployment Readiness Review and the President's follow-up decision represent the final deployment decision. Both are mistaken and give the Administration's centrist approach too little credit.

NMD is within our reach, but not yet within our grasp. Not long ago, Gen. Larry Welch and a review group of 11 took a long, hard look at this program.

Early in their report, they warned against "near-term deployment at the expense of properly completing the development activities needed for a system that meets the stated operational needs."

For example, the operational "Exoatmospheric Kill Vehicle" will not be coupled to an operational booster and tested until 2003. Since the operational booster packs 10 times the thrust of the provisional booster, the coupling of the two is a major event that will not be tested until the seventh flight test.

So the first flight test of an operational, integrated interceptor, supposedly the objective

system, will not occur until 2003 at the earliest; and until then, no one can say whether we are ready to deploy.

I have followed more than a few weapon systems over the years, and I have seen ambitious schedules, performance, and cost goals left in the dust. Ironically, in the case of NMD, what we now hear from official sources is more hedging than hype.

Listen, for example, to caveats issued by Phil Coyle, Director of Operational Test & Evaluation: "The aggressive schedule established for NMD presents a major challenge. The NMD program will have to compress the work of 10-12 years into eight or less. As a result, many of the design and T&E [test and evaluation] activities will be performed concurrently. Programs delays ... demonstrate an extremely high-risk schedule."

The conclusion one draws from Welch and Coyle is that we are not ready for a final deployment decision yet. The technology has not yet proved itself through rigorous testing, and an "irrevocable" decision to deploy would be untimely.

That's why Gen. Welch characterizes the Deployment Readiness Review as more of a technology feasibility review than a deployment review. This does not mean the system will never work. The test results to date are encouraging. But the system still needs to prove its mettle through rigorous testing.

There is far more to President Clinton's decision than deciding whether NMD is promising. It is unclear whether construction of the radar bed in Alaska violates the ABM Treaty, but it clearly raises ABM Treaty issues. So, our relations with Russia are linked to the President's upcoming decision, and this in turn affects other nations, including our allies.

We cannot let the Russians trump our decision to have missile defenses against limited ballistic missile threats, nor can they reasonably deny us the right to select our single site or a second site, when the defenses we are deploying will not change the strategic balance between us, now or for the foreseeable future.

But surely we do not want abrupt termination of the ABM Treaty to scuttle our chances for a deal on START III, or worse, wreck our Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programs, especially on the heels of the ratification of START II by the Russian Duma. CTR programs have already eliminated more warheads than any missile defense system now conceived could ever hope to counter.

The rogue missile threat is emerging, but the threat arising from the spread of nuclear materials is even greater. If we unilaterally withdraw from the ABM Treaty and undercut our efforts to stop proliferation, we may find that we have hastened the threat we were trying to thwart.

Although NMD development has a way to go, it is well ahead of our diplomacy. Neither Russia nor our NATO allies have yet adjusted to the change we propose in the strategic balance. We must take the time to explain the need for ballistic missile defenses not only to Russia, but our allies, who, after the defeat of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in the Senate, are uneasy about

the U.S. commitment to arms control.

In short, we still have our diplomatic work cut out for us. That is why we cannot scrap the ABM Treaty and ignore other diplomatic considerations to deploy a still-unproven NMD system. After 17 years and $50 billion, a limited NMD system is taking shape.

I am pleased with the progress we are making and satisfied with the Administration's resolve. I think the Administration has taken a reasonable, centrist approach, and is committed to developing a defense against a limited threat as quickly as technology will allow. At the same time, it is trying to work with Russia to modify the ABM treaty to permit deployment when the technology proves itself.

NMD may be the most politicized program in the history of weapons system procurement. It is past time that we treated NMD as we would any other system.

It should be rigorously tested, and when it shows that it can meet its operational requirements, it should be deployed, but only in concert with other measures to strengthen national security.

Ground-based NMD has been a long-time coming, and the worst thing Congress can do now is mandate a rush to completion or switch from a bird in the hand to a bird in the bush, from ground-based interceptors to boost-phase interceptors, which require technologies that are not even ready for development much less deployment.

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